Cultural chameleons and iconoclasts: Assimilation and reactance to cultural cues in biculturals' expressed personalities as a function of identity conflict

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ABSTRACT

Bicultural individuals vary in the degree to which their two cultural identities are integrated versus conflicting—Bicultural Identity Integration (BII). Past research on attribution biases finds that BII influences the way that biculturals shift in response to cultural primes: integrated biculturals shift assimilatively, whereas conflicted biculturals shift contrastively. Proposing that this reflects assimilation versus reactance responses, we tested whether it extends to shifts in self-perceived personality. In two experiments with Asian–American participants, we found that BII influences the direction of cultural priming effects (assimilation versus contrast) on the personality dimensions of need for uniqueness (Experiment 1) and extraversion (Experiment 2). As hypothesized, high BII shifted in a culturally assimilative direction, perceiving the self as more uniqueness-seeking and extraverted following American versus Asian priming, whereas low BII shifted in the reverse direction. Implications for research on bicultural identity, priming, personality, organizational and consumer behavior are discussed.

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If Americans were feeble subalterns, I'd lift weights and go to Marine officer candidate school... If Asians were shy and retiring, I'd try to be exuberant and jocular...”


How are the personalities of Asian-Americans affected by cues to Asian or American cultures? Considerable evidence supports a chameleonlike, assimilation process. Just as immigrants assimilate over generations (Eap, DeGarmo, Kawakami, Hara, Hall, & Teten, 2008), biculturals assimilate to cultural cues, shifting toward cultural norms that are situationally salient (Ramirez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martinez, Potter, & Pennebaker, 2006). However, assimilation may not be the whole story. Consistent with Liu’s autobiographical account of his iconoclastic responses to Asian expectations at school, some biculturals may respond by defying the cued cultural norms. We propose that cultural assimilation versus reactance in personality hinges on the bicultural’s identity structure: integrated identities engender assimilation, whereas conflicted identities engender reactance.

Culture, personality and biculturals

Cultural norms affect personality. Compared to Westerners, East Asians have a lower need for uniqueness (e.g., Aaker & Schmitt, 2001) and are less extraverted (e.g., McCrae, Yik, Trapnell, Bond, & Paulhus, 1998). These differences can be attributable to culture as East Asian immigrants have increasingly extraverted personalities with each generation in the US (Benet-Martinez & Karakitapoglu-Aygun 2003; Eap et al., 2008). Acculturation to Western norms may lead individuals to exhibit its corresponding personality characteristics (McCrae et al., 1998). Uniqueness-seeking and extraversion are thought to fit with individualist (e.g., North America) rather than collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asia) because they emphasize the independence of individuals from their groups (Eap et al., 2008; Ramirez-Esparza et al., 2006).

Other evidence for the culture-personality link comes from studies of personality shifts among biculturals in response to situational cues. Biculturals are described as individuals who have internalized two cultures and these cultures take turns in guiding their perceptions and behavior (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Psychological research finds that cues associated with culture (e.g., language) evoke in biculturals a tendency to express its normative characteristics, suggesting that cultural cues activate individuals’ cultural knowledge system to affect behavior. For example, Hong Kong students appear to others as more extraverted when conversing in English than in Chinese (Chen, 2007). Such differences are not only found in external appearances, but also in biculturals’ self-perceived personality traits. Mexican-Americans, for example, rate themselves as more extraverted when answering a survey in English, the language of their individualistic (American) culture, versus in Spanish, the language of their collectivist (Mexican) culture (Ramirez-Esparza et al., 2006). Similar cultural assimilation effects have been found in measures of...
biculturals' self-concepts and values (Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002), judgments (Hong et al., 2000), decision-making (Wong & Hong, 2005), and person descriptions (Mok & Morris, in preparation a). Also, biculturals respond assimilatively to different kinds of cultural cues (e.g., cultural icons, experimenter's cultural background; Hong et al., 2000; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2002).

However, sometimes biculturals react against cultural cues. Yang and Bond (1980) found that Hong Kong participants endorsed traditional Chinese values less when queried in Chinese than in English, perhaps because political dynamics at the time left Hong Kong residents feeling conflicted between their Chinese and Western identities. Ethnographic studies (Kibria, 2002) observe similar dynamics for individuals who are personally conflicted about Asian–American identities, such as a Chinese-American student who models his behavior opposite to his Chinese schoolmates, or a Chinese-American employee who feigns ignorance when the subject of Chinese cuisine comes up at work. Along with autobiographies (e.g., Liu, 1998), these observations suggest that reactance to cultural cues occur when biculturals experience identity conflict.

Identity conflict and reactance

Several theories support the link between identity conflict and reactance. In psychodynamic models (e.g., Erikson, 1950), personality develops through integrating conflicting identities into a coherent identity. If a conflict goes unresolved, the individual is less stable and inclined towards social deviance. Another perspective comes from immigrant acculturation research; marginal individuals torn between the heritage and host cultures have been associated with anti-conformity and creativity (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935). Finally, DuBois’ (1903/1961) account of the "double-consciousness" of African-Americans living between ethnic and mainstream cultures is another link between conflicted identities and norm defiance.

Recent psychological research (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997) emphasizes that biculturals vary in the degree to which their cultural identities are integrated. Bicultural Identity Integration (BII; Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002) measures the extent to which the two cultural identities are experienced as blended and compatible (high BII) versus separate and conflicting (low BII). Studies of attributional bias (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002) found that BII moderates responses to cultural cues. Following priming with American versus Asian cultural icons, Asian-Americans with high BII made more internal attributions (assimilating to the cultural norm), whereas those with low BII made more external attributions (contrasting against the cultural norm).\(^1\)

The present research

Differential responses to cultural cues as a function of BII may affect self-perceived personality as well: we hypothesized that whereas high BII would assimilate to cultural cues, low BII would react against cultural cues. We conducted two experiments with Asian–American participants, focusing on the personality dimensions of need for uniqueness and extraversion, where Asian and American norms are known to differ. We expected that high BII participants would report higher need for uniqueness (Experiment 1) and extraversion (Experiment 2) following American versus Asian priming, whereas low BII participants would show the opposite pattern.

Past studies have found effects of BII in domains other than personality; however, past evidence is ambiguous with regard to the reactance mechanism. Our research aimed to avoid alternative explanations to which past evidence about biculturals' assimilation versus contrast effects are vulnerable. Firstly, contrast effects may occur because the primes are perceived as extreme (Herr, 1986). Previously used primes featuring cultural landmark images (e.g., Great Wall of China, US Capitol building; Benet-Martinez et al., 2002) might trigger this contrast mechanism among lower BII individuals. Secondly, famous cultural images run the risk of making participants aware that the study involves their cultural biases, thus spurring overcorrection effects (Wegener & Petty, 1997). To avoid contrast effects from these different mechanisms, we developed a priming task with mundane images and presented them in the form of a design evaluation task.

A third alternative account involves the valence of primes. Past cultural primes were highly positive in valence (e.g., Statue of Liberty; Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). These may seem self-similar to high BII (who typically have had more positive cultural experiences) and self-discrepant to low BII (who typically have had more negative cultural experiences) (Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martinez, 2006). This variation in perceived self-discrepancy could explain assimilation versus contrast effects (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998). Hence, we sought neutral or moderate valence primes that would be equally self-discrepant for both BII groups. Our primes were mundane images on books and magazines (Experiment 1) and common culturally-associated names (Experiment 2).

Experiment 1—shifts in need for uniqueness

We tested the hypothesis that high BII would perceive themselves as more uniqueness-seeking after American versus Asian priming, whereas low BII would perceive themselves as less uniqueness-seeking. Our primes were mundane cultural images.

Method

Participants

Fifty-eight Asian-Americans (14 men; mean age = 22.10, SD = 3.79) at Columbia University participated in a web study for $5. Participants were recruited through campus fliers soliciting “East Asian–American Biculturals” participants’ ethnicities included Chinese (n = 46), Korean (n = 9), and Japanese (n = 3). On average, participants had lived 16.12 (SD = 8.61) years in the US. Identification with American and East Asian culture, rated on a scale of 1 (very weak) to 7 (very strong) was 5.47 (SD = 1.16) and 5.16 (SD = 1.42), respectively. Proficiency in English and an East Asian language, assessed on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 7 (very fluent) was 6.78 (SD = .59) and 5.03 (SD = 1.58), respectively. Twenty-five participants were first-generation biculturals (born in an East Asian country), whereas 33 were second-generation biculturals (born in the US). Because no immigrant-generation differences emerged on the independent or dependent variables, we collapsed across generation in the analysis.\(^2\) Participant ethnicity as a covariate did not affect the analysis below so it was not considered further.

Materials and procedure

Participants received a weblink with instructions to complete the study in one sitting and in a private and quiet location. For the priming manipulation, participants were randomly assigned

\(^1\) For the sake of brevity, our use of ‘Asian’ in this article refers to East Asian.

\(^2\) Whereas research implies a positive relationship between immigrant-generation and BII (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005), the relationship was not significant for this sample, r(58) = .04, p = .79. Also, whereas research suggests that immigrants assimilate their personality to host culture norms with increased stay in the host culture (e.g., McCrae, 1998), the relationship between generation in the US and uniqueness-seeking was not significant for this sample, r(58) = .11, p = .40.
to view four book covers (see Fig. 1) from either American (n = 28) or East Asian culture (n = 30), pre-tested for being moderate in valence.\(^3\) Participants listed two thoughts evoked by each cover. Next, participants completed the Need for Uniqueness Scale (NUS; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977); all 32-items were rated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (a = .84, M = 3.00, SD = .43). Afterwards, participants rated themselves on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) in relation to a description of identity integration:

“I am a bicultural who combines both American and Asian cultures and does not feel caught between these two cultures. I feel like an Asian–American (i.e., hyphenated), and does not feel like someone moving between the two cultures.”

Despite their limitations, vignettes often serve better than scales in tapping cultural identities (Peng, Nisbett, & Wong, 1997). Hence, this was the initial approach in measuring BII (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Finally, participants completed a demographic survey.

Results and discussion

NUS was not correlated with BII (M = 3.98, SD = 1.43; median = 4.00), r(58) = .09, p = .12, or with American identification, r(58) = .21, p = .12. We submitted the NUS score to a 2 (cultural priming: American versus Asian) x BII between-subjects ANCOVA. There was a main effect of cultural priming, F(1, 54) = 7.81, p < .01, \(\eta^2 = .13\), which was qualified by an interaction with BII, F(1, 54) = 6.12, p < .05, \(\eta^2 = .10\). Fig. 2 displays the interaction using a median split on BII, following Benet-Martinez et al. (2002). As predicted, high BII (n = 24) scored higher on NUS in the American than Asian prime condition (M = 3.20, SE = .11, versus M = 2.97, SE = .12), whereas low BII (n = 34) scored lower on NUS in the American than Asian prime condition (M = 2.74, SE = .10, versus M = 3.16, SE = .09). These results imply that BII moderates cultural priming effects on self-perceived personality, evoking assimilative shifts for high BIs and contrastive shifts for low BIs. Contrast effects without extreme or self-discrepant primes support the proposed reactance mechanism.

Experiment 2—shifts in extraversion

Experiment 2 focused on a different personality dimension. Whereas uniqueness motivation might be considered a minor facet of personality, extraversion is a major axis. We tested whether high BIs would perceive themselves as more extraverted following American versus Asian priming, whereas low BIs would perceive themselves as less extraverted.

Experiment 2 also used a different priming approach; we adopted a more rigorous manipulation of culture. Pictorial primes risk making participants aware that culture is being studied, so a more subtle priming manipulation was introduced, which exposed participants to culturally-associated names in the context of a prior task.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty East Asian-Americans (60 first-generation, 60 second-generation, 41 males; mean age = 21.81, SD = 4.19) were recruited in the same manner as Experiment 1 and received $12. Participants’ ethnicities included Chinese (n = 97), Korean (n = 15), and Japanese (n = 8). Participants had lived, on average, 14.33 years (SD = 7.96) in the US Participants identified with both American (M = 5.10, SD = 1.43) and East Asian culture (M = 5.48, SD = 1.15), and proficiency in English and an East Asian language was 6.60 (SD = 0.86) and 5.24 (SD = 1.56), respectively, assessed along the scales used in the previous experiment.

\(^3\) A pre-test was conducted with a separate sample of 44 Asian-American students. Participants completed the same priming task and then rated their affect (“How do you feel right now?”) on a scale of 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good). The primes engendered moderate affect (M = 4.27, SD = .85), although slightly positive relative to the scale midpoint, \(t(43) = 2.14, p = .04\). Importantly, results showed no effects of culture condition or of BII, suggesting that the primes were not more self-discrepant in valence for low versus high BII participants.
Participants’ ethnicity did not affect the analysis below so it is not discussed further.

Materials and procedure
Participants were run in small groups in a classroom and completed the “Social Perception Study” individually on paper. First, participants completed a performance evaluation task where they were asked to play the role of a manager in North America (n = 60) or East Asia (n = 60) and appraise employees’ performance. Participants in the American condition saw employees with Western names (T. Anderson, H. Williams, C. Taylor, J. Harris), whereas participants in the Asian condition saw Asian names (T. Lee, H. Choi, C. Yim, J. Chang) (see Mok, Cheng, & Morris, Submitted for publication).

Next, participants rated their own personality “in general” on a list of 15 adjectives. Ten items tapped extraversion or introversion (outgoing, talkative, energetic, active, assertive, shy, quiet, reserved, timid, unadventurous) and the rest were fillers; ratings were made on a scale of 1 (not at all like me) to 7 (very much like me). An extraversion composite was formed by averaging the extraversion and reversed introversion items (z = .86). Participants then completed the 4-item BII-Cultural Conflict measure (BIIS-1; Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; e.g., “I feel conflicted between the American and Asian ways of doing things”). Last, they completed a demographic questionnaire.

Results and discussion
A 2 (cultural priming: American versus Asian) × 2 (generation: first versus second) × BII between-subjects ANCOVA was performed on the extraversion score, controlling for American identification. This analysis revealed a main effect of generation, F(1, 114) = 4.83, p < .05, η² = .04, and of American identification, F(1, 114) = 9.29, p < .05, η² = .08. As predicted, the interaction between cultural priming and BII was significant, F(1, 114) = 4.51, p < .05, η² = .04. As illustrated in Fig. 3, high BIIs (n = 65) scored higher on extraversion in the American than Asian prime condition (M = 4.69, SE = .17, versus M = 4.35, SE = .16), implying culturally assimilative shifts in self-perceived personality. Conversely, low BIIs (n = 55) scored lower on extraversion in the American than Asian prime condition (M = 4.37, SE = .17, versus M = 4.68, SE = .18), implying culturally contrastive shifts in personality or reactance. This conceptually replicates the findings in Experiment 1.

General discussion
Results from two experiments varying personality dimensions, cultural cues, and measures of BII provide converging evidence for our hypothesis. Biculturals with integrated identities shifted their personality in a culturally assimilative direction, whereas conflicted biculturals shifted in the opposite direction. High BII Asian–American participants perceived themselves as more uniqueness-seeking and extraverted following American versus Asian priming, whereas low BIIs perceived themselves as less uniqueness-seeking and extraverted. This research is the first experimental evidence, to our knowledge, of cultural reactance in personality; the only past evidence for this phenomenon comes from descriptions in ethnographies and autobiographies of biculturals.

Our findings contribute to several literatures. The literature on biculturals and cultural priming has observed that BII moderates cultural priming effects on attributional bias (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002), but has not resolved whether this reflects cognitive versus motivational mechanisms. Past studies used primes of famous or highly positive cultural images, and images that are obvious icons of cultural traditions, which could elicit contrast effects through cognitive mechanisms such as perceived extremity, self-discrepancy or overcorrection (Cheng et al., 2006; Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). To avoid these ambiguities, our research developed new protocols for cultural priming (book evaluation, Experiment 1; employee evaluation, Experiment 2) that expose participants to everyday images and names associated with the two cultures. Our findings converge with recent evidence for a motivational mechanism in the moderating effects of BII (Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martinez, 2008).

Our findings also contribute to the literature on culture and personality. Unlike research on immigrant-generation effects (e.g., Eap et al., 2008) which implies that biculturals simply have fixed per-
sonalities in-between two cultural modes, our research reveals that cultural cues can enact either modal personalities. Further, we find the direction that biculturals shift in response to the cultural context depends on their identity structure. The immigrant-generation effects in past studies may have been affected by the fact that (a) the research generally occurs in the host culture context and (b) latter-generation immigrants tend to have integrated rather than conflicted cultural identities (Benet-Martinez & Haritasos, 2005). To fully understand the complexity of immigrants' personality shifts across generations, our studies suggest that one should test personalities in both the host and heritage culture context.

Our research complements recent work on the relationship between BII and personality. Whereas Miramontez, Benet-Martinez, and Nguyen (2008) showed, using a correlational approach, that higher BII is associated with aligning one's self-perceived personality with the normative personality of the heritage and host cultures at the profile level (across the Big 5), we showed this at a trait or mean level. The assimilation effects among higher BII suggest a greater willingness to self-stereotype in relation to the cultural in-group norms.

Why do integrated biculturals respond assimilatively to cultural cues whereas conflicted biculturals respond contrastively? Our view is one of internal identity management. Individuals who view their two cultural identities as intertwined and compatible (high BII) may have a more secure sense of self relative to those who view their cultural identities as dissociated and oppositional (low BII). Thus, integrated biculturals can follow the lead of cultural cues without feeling that they are leaving part of themselves behind. Conversely, conflicted biculturals are more likely to experience a cultural cue as threatening to their other cultural identity, spurring a need to retreat, or affirm that other identity to restore equilibrium in the bicultural identities. This notion shares connections with theories in clinical psychology (e.g., Dowd, 1989) and acculturation (Garza & Gallegos, 1995) that reactance arises, in part, when individuals seek to regain control over the self and the situation. We focused on self-reported personality to test this private reactance dynamic versus more public dynamics involving an audience.

Habitual reactance to cultural cues may have group-level implications. Sociological research notes the emergence of oppositional identities or cultures among groups who are torn between two cultures. Rankling against British colonial rule led Indian activists and intellectuals to construct and propagate a version of Indian culture that selectively highlighted features, such as non-materialism, contrastive with the British culture (Sen, 2006). Similar to colonized groups, non-voluntary immigrant groups tend to construct aspects of their sub-cultures through contrast to the culture of the politically dominant group (Ogbu, 1993). These collective-level trends may emerge in part from individuals' reactance to ubiquitous cues of a dominant culture.

Our findings have several practical implications. Counselors, teachers, and managers who make salient certain cultural norms or expectations may elicit productive responses from some biculturals and counterproductive reactions from others. To handle the problem of reactance, one strategy may be to help biculturals feel less conflicted about their cultural identities by drawing their attention to positive experiences with culture; positivity facilitates identity integration (Cheng & Lee, 2009).

Fig. 3. Extraversion composite ratings across priming conditions for high and low BII participants.

Consumer marketing is another area of practical implications. Manipulating biculturals' uniqueness motivation and extraversion may have different effects on their choice of products, such as between those that are novel versus conventional, or stimulating versus comforting (Wheeler & Berger, 2007). Preliminary data shows that high (low) BII's choose more stimulating products after Americans may generate more novel ideas in an American versus Asian setting, whereas low BII's may show the reverse. An ongoing series of studies supports this idea (Mok & Morris, in preparation b), suggesting that shifts in self-perceived personality come with attendant shifts in problem-solving style.

Conclusions

The current research goes beyond past studies which typically assume that biculturals have a stable self-perceived personality, or they merely assimilate to cultural cues like chameleons. Our research examined biculturals' personality in two cultural contexts using a novel priming stimuli, and showed that their identity conflict critically affects whether they respond like cultural chameleons versus iconoclasts. Our research calls attention to important features of immigrants' adjustment—the ability to form integrated cultural identities, and the dual cultural contexts that they daily traverse.
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References


